

pajama-clad little fellow toward the front door with her snout. It was trash day, and she wanted out. Roy took her hint and pushed the front door open for her, and he grabbed her around the neck as she passed him and swung his leg up over her back and mounted her. He was going for a ride.

The trash cans weren't out in front of the Leahy house. Ellis, the lord of the manor, was a procrastinator. The plastic barrels usually stayed inside the garage until the last minute, when Lord Ellis was awakened by the roar of the trash truck as it rumbled down the street. In a wrinkled bathrobe and Ruth's bedroom slippers, his hair (what was left of it) tousled, his face puffy, his eyes bloodshot, Ellis Leahy would drag the cans from the garage to the sidewalk, usually beating Arturo and his voracious steel monster to the curb by seconds, much to Arturo's amusement.

But if the pickin's were slim in front of the Leahy house, the curb at the Johnson place, right next door, was another story: three overflowing plastic barrels and a dozen shiny green garbage bags, all of them fragrant, ripe with possibility. Sandra trotted toward the mother lode. Little Roy jounced and giggled on top of her. Off in the distance — two, perhaps three blocks away — a trash truck growled. And Sandra dug in, driving her snout through one of the green bags to immediate pay dirt: a wedge of four contiguous slices of rubberized De Nio's pizza.

Little Roy slid down and tugged one of the slices off the wedge. Sandra squealed and shook her head and pulled her chunk of the pie away and spun around and started eating. Next door, Ellis dragged his can to the curb then stopped to watch his son and his wife's pig in action. "I wonder," he thought, "if there are truffles around here. I gotta get that damned pig out there after some truffles, make her start earning her damned keep."

Roy finished his one slice; Sandra finished her three. Then the two foragers scowled at each other, and then each of them picked a separate trash bag to attack as Arturo's trash truck rounded the corner.

## BUNGEE BLUES

It is illegal to bungee jump from the bridges and railroad trestles in San Luis County, so they do it from the baskets of hot-air balloons over the wide, gently sloping creek valley behind the beach city of Loma Alta. Brightly colored canopies rise with the sun to float over the spring-green wild grasses, the grids of the strawberry fields, the



fluffy, deep-green orange orchards. The jumpers bail out, howling, into stupidly brave swan dives that end in elastic bounces fifty feet above the hard ground. They laugh, crazy with the adrenalin, while the guys in the basket reel them back in....

Ellis Leahy treated his wife Ruth — as a forty-ninth birthday gift — to her first jump. Bob Larsen — owner/operator of Bungee Bob's — fired the balloon an extra three hundred feet into the air because he didn't want Ruth — a stout two hundred and twenty pounder with a muu muu whipping and snapping around her thick calves as she leaned out of the basket peering down — to have a nasty (and potentially law suit provoking) collision with the ground.

"I think," said Ruth, as Ellis fastened the elastic bands around her ankles, "that you're trying to get me killed."

"Nonsense," said Ellis. "Just trying to spice up your life a bit."

"You take out a new life insurance policy on me or somethin'?"

"Heh, heh. Heh, heh," Ellis chuckled as he cinched the elastic band down tightly.

"Mrs. Leahy," said Bungee Bob. "It's time." And to be safe he turned the propane flame on again, to put another ten feet — a little cushion of safety — between Ruth and the ground. The flame roared for thirty seconds, then Bob killed it.

"All right, Ruthie, ya ready?" said Ellis, his hands massaging her thick shoulders.

"It's so peaceful up here," said Ruth. Then she put her foot on the lip of the basket, grunted, stood and jumped.

The bungees tensed after a four-second free-fall, then they began to stretch. Ruth fell, her speed decreasing gradually, until she hung (oh-so-momentarily, if the bungees had their way) a foot above the waving weed tops, where she panicked and grabbed onto a tough, gnarled old low-growing manzanita shrub.

The cords were stretched to near-invisibility as Bungee Bob, to avoid having his balloon pulled groundward, fired his flame, increasing the tension. The manzanita, in better times, would have won: it had survived a hundred and a half years, had out-lived the Spanish and the Mexicans and might have out-lived the Americans, but California was suffering a drought — six long dry years —



and the plant's root system had shriveled and become brittle. The tug of the bungees pulled Ruth, and the manzanita, away from the earth, slingshotting her — a hundred miles an hour and rump first — into the balloon's basket. The wicker explosion left Bob and Ellis and Ruth dangling from the gondola's tattered remnants, and it scattered the manzanita seeds over a square mile of dry ground, where they waited patiently for rain.

#### LITTLE SOY SAUSAGES

Ruth Leahy has a low aptitude for dealing with the general public, a deficiency that became apparent when she — on her first day on the job as a sample server in the Lucky's Food Store — attacked a man who told her that one of the little soy sausages she was frying up and handing out tasted like, "dog turds."

Which wasn't, by the way, what the camera and sound crew — hired by the sausage company to record the raving responses of the real people to their product — wanted to hear. Hidden behind the dairy case, they recorded Ruth's right cross to the man's eye followed by the chase down the frozen food aisle, the man hurdling the display freezer with Ruth — stocky and middle-aged, her high heels abandoned back by the frozen pizza — on his tail. And they recorded the smoking pan with its untended sausages and the cloudburst from the overhead fire sprinklers and the ensuing pandemonium.

Ruth, of course, lost her job. The sausage company burned the film. But the camera man had made a copy that he intended to sell to the 'Jokes and Jests' T.V. show, but Ruth wouldn't sign the release, and fame passed her by.

#### FORGET ALL ABOUT GALILEO

Ruth and Ellis and the sky-diving instructor huddled in the back of the tiny, two-propeller airplane. The little machine rattled and roared and wheezed and groaned, and finally climbed to the requisite three thousand feet.

Ruth and Ellis were taking their first jump. They'd gone through Loma Alta Sky-Diving School's indoctrination and instruction class that morning, where they and their classmates practiced leaping from a five-foot platform into loose sand, and they'd practiced pulling their imaginary rip cords, and they practiced rolling when they hit the ground. The instructor had made a crack about having to find an extra large 'chute for the fat lady (Ruth), and